

TEXTILES

fashion that doesn't cost the Earth

Several times a year in the world's fashion capitals, willowy models in dazzling outfits sashay down the catwalk to present the coming season's trends. Each year a handful of designers sets the tone, says what's in and what's not. Chain-stores and mass retailers then adapt their ideas for the man and woman in the street. Fashion feeds a growing industry and ranks textile and clothing as the world's second-biggest economic activity for intensity of trade (\$353 billion in 2001). However, stiff competition forces down costs while working conditions, more often than not in developing countries, are far from ideal. The environment pays a heavy price too. To improve conditions for workers and stem pollution, textile producers, manufacturers and distributors are launching the first initiatives built around sustainable development: who knows, ecology may be the next new trend!

IMPACTS

Hard-to-recycle synthetic fibres

The textile industry is shared between natural fibres such as wool, silk, linen, cotton and hemp, and man-made ones, the most common of which are synthetic fibres (polyamide, acrylic) made from petrochemicals. Most of the clothes in our wardrobes contain polyester, elastane or lycra. These cheap and easy-care fibres are becoming the textile industry's miracle solution. However, their manufacture creates pollution and they are hard to recycle (with nylon taking 30 to 40 years to decompose).

Water pollution and volatile emissions

The textile and clothing industry is a diverse one, as much in the raw materials it uses as the techniques it employs. At each of the six stages typically required to make a garment, the negative impacts on the environment are as numerous as they are varied. Spinning, weaving and industrial manufacture undermine air quality. Dyeing and printing consume vast amounts of water and chemicals, and release numerous volatile agents into the atmosphere that are particularly harmful to our health.

www.p2pays.org/ref/02/01099.htm

www.c2p2online.com/main.php3?heading=163§ion=155

Child labour

According to the International Labour Organization, there are 246 million child-workers (age 5 to 14) in the world today. The Asian-Pacific region exploits the most child labour, followed by sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. In the textile sector, children are a cheap workforce for picking cotton, hand-sewing, etc. Thanks to the scandals revealed by NGOs and to consumer pressure, global brands are slowly integrating social clauses into their subcontractor agreements. The European Apparel and Textile Organisation (Euratex) and the European Trade Union Federation of Textiles, Clothing and Leather (ETUF:TCL) have also developed a code of good conduct for the profession. www.ilo.org/ilolex/english/subjectE.htm



→ Sweatshops are factories that employ people in unacceptable conditions: low wages, long hours, health and safety risks, and non-respect of workers' basic rights.

ALTHOUGH COTTON ACCOUNTS FOR LESS THAN 3% OF THE WORLD'S FARMED LAND IT CONSUMES ALMOST A QUARTER OF INSECTICIDES AND 10% OF HERBICIDES.

→ 27

recycled plastic bottles will make one fleece sweater

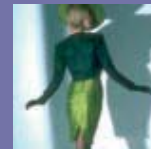


100% COTTON, 100% POLLUTION

What could seem more natural than a cotton T-shirt? Yet in reality ... First of all, the cotton must be grown; this entails vast amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides that pollute and deplete the soil. Despite mechanized harvesting, the cotton industry is still largely dependent on cheap labour. The raw cotton is then dyed, meaning chemicals and heavy metals with harmful effects on the environment. Finally bands of cotton are assembled in factories to be sewn into a T-shirt. From wastewater emissions to air pollution and energy consumption, the textile industry weighs heavily on the environment. www.tve.org/ho/doc.cfm?aid=393&lang=English

→ 60

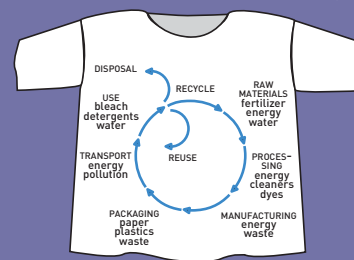
million tonnes of fibre clothe 3 billion people



COTTON DRIES OUT THE ARAL SEA

Until the 1960s, the Aral Sea's 66,000 sq. km. yielded annual catches of 40,000 tonnes of fish while its marshes and wetlands extended over 550,000 hectares. All this changed when the former Soviet Union declared Central Asia a cotton-production zone. Industrial-scale drainage for irrigation, pesticides and fertilizers soon got the better of this inland sea. Today, 95% of the marshes and wetlands have given way to sand deserts, and more than 50 lakes covering 60,000 hectares have run dry. Now half its original size, the Aral Sea symbolizes the environmental impact of intensive cotton production. www.fao.org/ag/magazine/9809/spot2.htm

LIFE CYCLE OF A T-SHIRT



A T-shirt has an impact on the environment at every stage in its life: water and energy consumption, air and water pollution, pesticides, chemical dyes, detergents and waste.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

→ Clean Clothes

The international Clean Clothes campaign urges textile brands and distributors to take concrete and effective measures to improve the very poor working conditions that prevail in clothes and footwear manufacturing. Since its launch, and thanks to active public interest, this initiative has succeeded in winning companies to its cause.

www.cleanclothes.ch



→ Eco-textiles are all the rage

Some companies have developed new eco-friendly textiles from algae, soya, milk casein, bamboo, etc. Ingeo, a natural synthetic fibre made by distilling plant sugar from plant starches such as corn, has made its high-fashion debut thanks to the Italian jean designer Diesel, and soon Versace Sport. Other firms make clothes from natural or recycled materials. In China, Bambru Textiles works with bamboo fiber, spun from bamboo grown in Yunnan province, to propose a range of household linens in this 100% natural and biodegradable material. Patagonia has been manufacturing fleece sweaters from recycled plastic bottles for several years.

www.fostplus.be/tp/page.cfm?pagId=26&Lg=EN

→ Big-name brands go eco-friendly

For several years now, developed and developing countries have forged partnerships around fair trade in textiles. High-street names have also entered the age of sustainable development. Some use organic cotton or hemp; others process fibres without heavy metals or ensure acceptable working conditions. Notable examples include Agnès B, Katherine Hamnett, Timberland and H&M. www.earthfashion.com



HEMP, THE NATURAL CHOICE

Good news for farmers: hemp is making a big comeback in the fashion world. Indeed, hemp grows without fertilizer, requires minimum attention, doesn't deplete soil nutrients and is easy to harvest. As a result most hemp by-products are now certified organic.

PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Individuals

- ASK MANUFACTURERS ABOUT RAW MATERIALS AND MANUFACTURING CONDITIONS
- PREFER MATERIALS AND PRODUCTS THAT ORIGINATE IN THE COUNTRY OF PURCHASE
- DON'T BUY CLOTHES FROM COMPANIES THAT MAINTAIN POOR WORKING CONDITIONS
- PASS ON CLOTHES YOU NO LONGER WEAR → CUSTOMISE FOR A NEW LOOK → WASH CAREFULLY (CHOOSE DETERGENTS THAT POLLUTE LESS AND USE SMALLER AMOUNTS) AND CARE FOR YOUR CLOTHES (E.G. WAX LEATHER).

Companies and organizations

- SUPPLY ECO-FRIENDLY AND "ETHICALLY CORRECT" WORK-CLOTHES AND UNIFORMS
- ENCOURAGE TRADE IN "ECOLOGICAL CLOTHES" (THROUGH GRANTS AND ASSISTANCE)
- ORGANIZE EVENTS (FASHION SHOWS, DEBATES, CHRISTMAS MARKETS) TO PROMOTE ECO-TEXTILES → PREFER ECOLOGICALLY CERTIFIED CORPORATE GIFTS AND SOLIDARITY INITIATIVES → USE CERTAIN TEXTILE-BASED RECYCLED PAPERS

FIND OUT MORE

Ethical clothing:

Worldwide Responsible Apparel Production (USA):

www.wrapapparel.org

Fair Labor Association (USA):

www.fairlabor.org

Criteria for the European eco-label for textile products:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/ecolabel/pdf/infokit/new_2002/fact_textiles_2002_en.pdf

European eco-label for footwear:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/ecolabel/pdf/infokit/new_2002/fact_shoes_2002_en.pdf

Online video: The Flowering of Eco-fashion:

www.tvlink.org/templates/main_v.cfm?id=65&video=43&lang=en&dg=env

Information on the environment, textiles, leather and footwear:

www.unctad.org/en/docs/ditcted3_en.pdf

Sustainable cotton project:

www.sustainablecotton.org

Organic cotton production certification:

www.skal.com

Organic cotton clothes:

www.organiccottondirectory.net

Eco-friendly clothing brands:

www.americanapparel.net

www.patagonia.com

AT UNEP

→ "SHOPPING FOR A BETTER WORLD"

In 2003 UNEP launched an initiative to urge retail, fashion and communication professionals to pool their experience and find new "ethical and ecological" products.

www.unep.org/media/review/vol26no1/UNEP0103.PDF